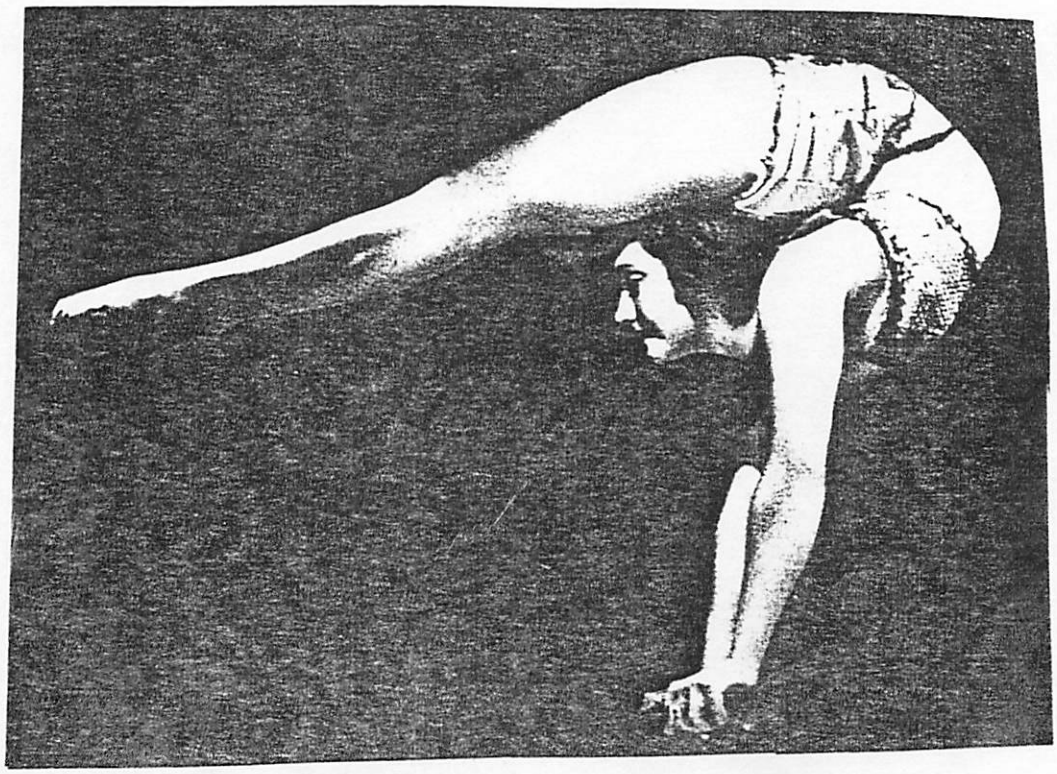
LIMBER TIMES

NEWSLETTER OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONTORTION SOCIETY

NO. 26 NOVEMBER, 1988



MERIBETH OLD

Meribeth Webber

Meribeth was born in Yates Center and went to school in Chanute; She was a typical Southeast Kansas girl and just as they do today if she went in for sports or cheerleading or just dancing, she gave it "her all".

In those days in Chanute "Dad Ketcham" organized a team of young performers, tap and ballet dancers and acrobats who went around the area bringing life and fun in cinemas, school houses, nursing homes; wherever they were needed.

This directed Meribeth towards show business and before long she ended up in Chicago at the school of Bruce R. Bruce, where she began to take professional engagements under the name of "Brucetta". When a New York agent became interested in her, she was soon working all over America.

When war came she gave it all up and offered her services to the USO. They sent her to London where she worked with Bob Hope around the various USA bases. She was in the first troop to cross the Channel after "D" Day; Just three of them of which the music was provided by a Myron Floran who is now the famous accordianist in the Lawrence Welk Show.

She was in the midst of the Battle of the Bulge where the Germans captured her props and her costumes. When armistice came she returned to the USA and continued working in such places as the Palace Theater, New York, Las Vegas and for a time with Ted Lewis.

When she received an offer to go to Europe for seven weeks she had immediate success and ended up staying there for seven years. Europe is still the cradle of the performing arts and it was here that she received a treasure trove of experience on which she would later draw for the benefit of her students in the many exciting recitals she would present.

This was a world where she would rub shoulders and work with other performers from vaudeville to the legitimate theater; from London pantomime to comedy, from the circus to the sacred halls of ballet in the Place de Clichy where those two old ballerinas from imperial Russia ruled with a rod of iron and where she took her classes regularly.

It was in London that she met Reginald Webber son of Sir Arthur and Kathleen Webber of Henfield Sussex and after a courtship which lasted from Madrid to Helsinki. Finland; they were married in Paris in 1959. This was just after she was invited to appear in a Command Performance before the President of France, General de Gaulle at the Palais de Chaillot.

She had one more engagement in Australia and completed her last professional performance at the Radio City Easter Music Hall show in New York in 1962.

She taught in Wichita, Iola, Chanute and Yates Center. In the last two years she worked in pain but she was more than compensated by the quality and the affection given to her by her pupils. You may be sure she is watching them all now with love and pride.

By Reginald Webber
Yates Center

Meribeth and Reginald Webber served as Grard Marshals for the 1986 Yates Center Day Parade.

(The above article was printed in the Yates Center News, Yates Center, Kansas August 27, 1987 and was sent to Limber Times by Reginald Webber.)

NOTES

We hope that readers will enjoy this issue, highlighting the career of MERIBETH OLD. Thanks to Reginald Webber, Glenn Manacher, Lyndon Phifer and George Garrard for their contributions to this tribute to a great performer.

As mentioned in our last issue, ULA has two new videotapes available: "Ula in Passive Stretching" and "Ula in Her Fabulous Splits". Contact her directly for more information: Ula Matteson, 9039 Pemberton Street, Spring Hill, FL 33526 USA.

Member photographer Denny Miller of Anaheim, California can now do videotaping as well as still photography.

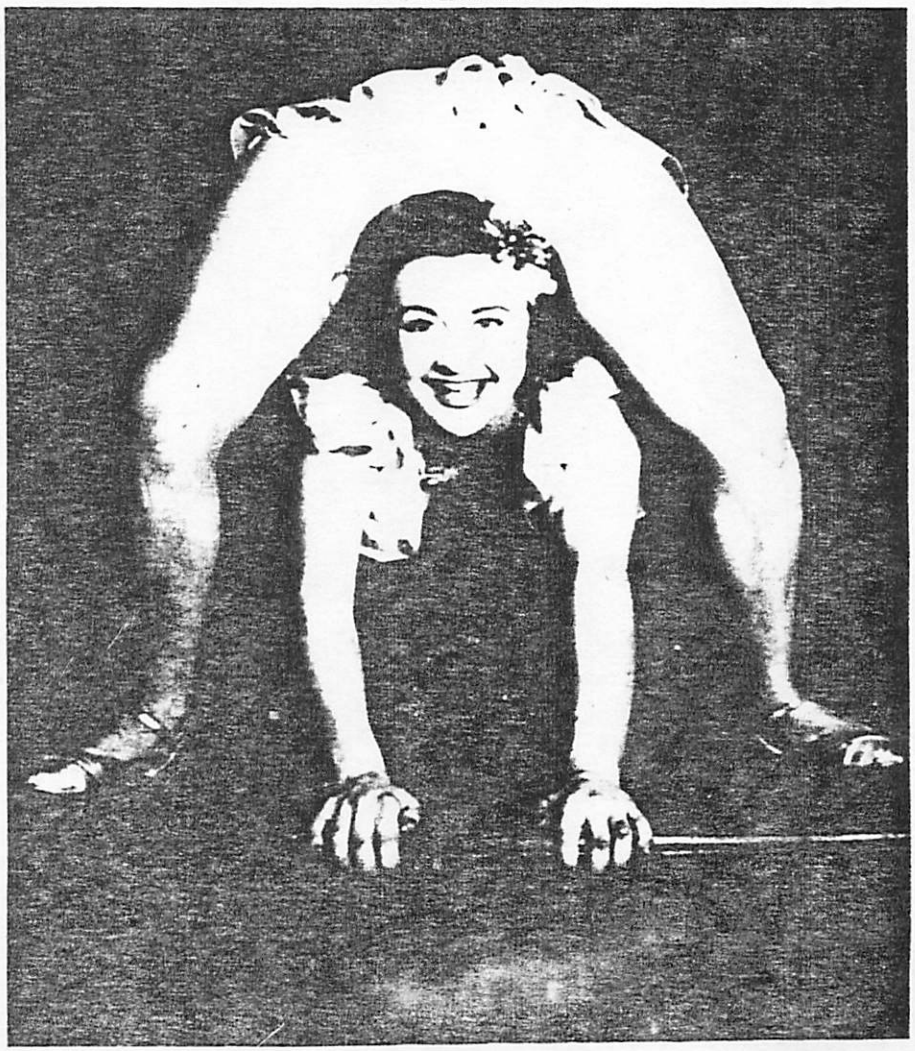
LIMBER TIMES

NEWSLETTER OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONTORTION SOCIETY

Published by Ron Simpson, P.O. Box 11770, Pueblo, Colorado 81001 U.S.A. Subscription rate is $16.50 for twelve issues ($21.00 outside U.S., Canada and Mexico); air mail is $12.00 additional. Membership in the Society is an additional $2.00 ($3.00 for countries other than U.S., Canada and Mexico) which includes the annual Directory of Members and a free listing.

Classified advertising rates are 25¢ per word, payable in advance. Please enquire about additional rates.

Meribeth Old



The following is a review of Meribeth's act, in a translation from a French newspaper:

"MERIBETH OLD, AMERICAN CONTORTIONIST: An extraordinary contortionist reveal the secrets of her strange and painful calling" -

"Sitting on one's head is not the most comfortable position there is. For the majority of people, indeed, it is physically impossible. Just thinking of it, most people shudder and exclaim 'That would break every bone in my body'.

"Still, for young Meribeth Old, extraordinary india-rubber girl, sitting on her head in the most normal thing. Normal, that is, in the sense that this exploit forms part of her daily life.

"Those who have seen her this week were left speechless by the perfect ease with which she executed the most fantastic contortions. But they only saw the routine offered to the public. To know what precedes this sensational presentation, one has to witness, off-stage, the preliminary exercises red-headed little Meribeth Old must go through before every show.

"Before every appearence and for at least a half-hour, even though she has been a professional contortionist for thirteen years. For even though one has been limbered up by years of continual exercise to reach the perfection attained by Meribeth Old, a daily period of warming up is necessary to prevent tearing a ligament, or straining a muscle, with the well-known consequences.

"Meribeth Old is small and red-headed. She is also slim, which is easily understood after seeing her five minutes at work. She began by learning tap-dancing. Her teacher, who found pupils too stiff, had them do limbering exercises. And young Meribeth found one day that she preferred the life of a contortionist ot that of an dancer.

"And so she continued her efforts, and today, after fifteen or twenty minutes of exercise, she can slide into a split while bent backwards double, the back of her neck firmly pressed against her buttocks. When one realizes the patient efforts required of a dancer to accomplish the splits in a more normal position, it becomes evident how much work Meribeth Old has put into this simple feat.

"The preliminary exercises begin in a relatively simple fashion: an ordinary bath towel is spread out on the floor; the young contortionist places a small square of sponge at one end of the towel. She kneels before the rubber pad and, leaning forward, rests her chin on it. And then slowly, almost painfully (which contrasts completely with the ease with which she will perform the same movement later, before the audience), she arches her spine and, her feet dropping before her shoulders, she begins a rotating motion.

"Bit by bit, her breathing changes to a slight panting, the muscles stretch and retract. Bit by bit, her back bends further. At the end of ten minutes, Meribeth Old has succeeded in touching the floor ahead of her shoulders, not with her feet this time, but with her knees. At this stage, her spinal column forms a complete "U" with the two ends touching.

"This exercise over, she practices the splits for awhile, to get her breath back. She practices the splits, indeed, but with this difference - the heel of her forward foot rests on a chair. Now and then a little gasp of pain escapes the lips of the young contortionist in spite of herself. Her muscles are not yet warmed up.

"Next comes exercising against the wall. This exercise consists of raising one leg, held rigidly straight, until the thigh touches the ear of the young contortionist. The second exercise goes like this: the young woman faces the wall and then, throwing back her head until her back is completely bent, she forces herself double until she can touch the wall with her head, and all without leaning her knees against the wall. The repeated knocking of the head against the cold wall has a sinister sound to it. One wonders whether to admire the feat or condemn the humans who exert such effort and such sacrifices for their entertainment.

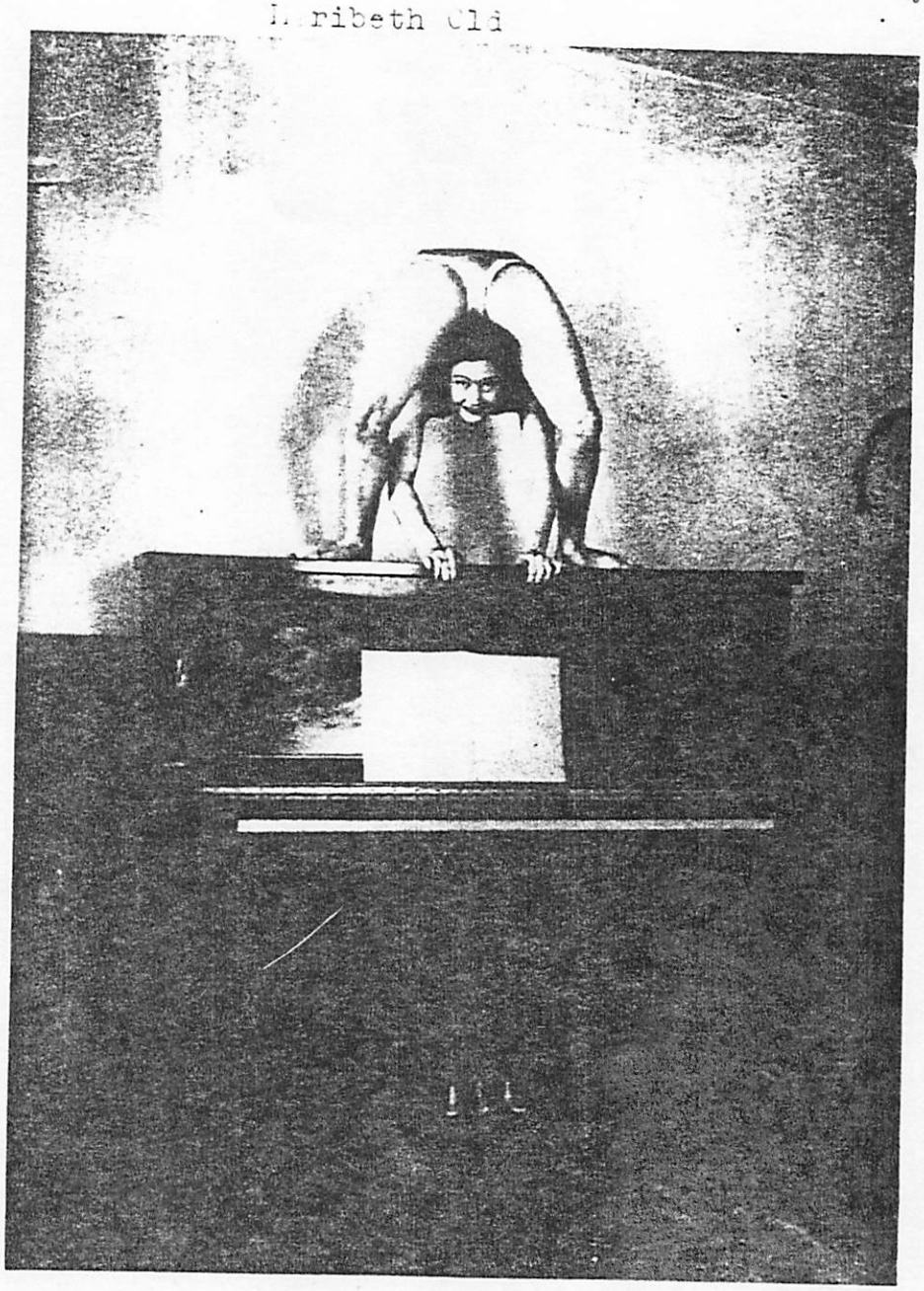
"For this series of exercises will be repeated before each performance. Six times a day if there are six shows. The muscles 'cool off' quickly, the young woman explains. Sometimes it is enough to walk through a draft and it has to be begun all over.

"But what is most astonishing is that the young contortionist, once the preliminary exercises re over, executes the most complicated movements with a smile on her lips. Breathing becomes even, despite the visable physical effort. The young woman can go through her routine, perform the most dangerous leaps and flips, all as though it were the easiest thing in the world.

"And yet, Meribeth Old insists she has normally articulated joints. The so-called 'double-jointedness', she says, is often dangerous for a contortionist. To be an india-rubber girl, one needs only infinite patience and inflexible will power. And, at the start, one must accept physical discomfort or pain as a normal part of training.

"Go to see the titian-haired Meribeth Old and her routine. She will astound you, beyond any doubt. But realize, also, that behind this astonishing suppleness lies a frequently difficult preparation. To think that there are those who will watch this performance half-distractedly, as if it were completely normal. How true it is that the gentle smile of the contortionist reveals not at all the efforts that had to be made to attain this perfection."

Meribeth Old



George Garrard writes:

"I was sorry to read in Limber Times of Meribeth Old's death.. She was a sweet girl. I had the pleasure of meeting her several times. In London when she starred in Bertram Mills Circus at Olympia, London, one Christmas season - again in London when she was in a revue at the Delphi Theatre with Tommy Trinder and Shani Wallis. This revue was also I think the first West End of London appearence of Shirley Bassey. And I met Meribeth in Paris. She was a great favourite in Caberet there, especially at the 'Novvelle Eve' in Pigalle. We corresponded onwards since her retirement, up to 1986 Christmas cards."

he's Tied Up In Knots", Octavia Turley, in e Wichita (Ks) Beacon. tober 8, 1964:

bit of female Kansas lent has been tying erself in knots for years r the enjoyment of audi- ces the world over.

he is Meribeth Webber Yates Center, profes- onally known as Meribeth d, contortionist, who s fascinated young and d from Norway to the fic.

eribeth, daughter of . and Mrs. C.R. Old Yates Center, has been ncing since she was eight ars old. She began her udy of dancing in Cha- ute through the encourage- ent of her Yates Center mnasium teacher, Flora nergan. She taught acro- tics and dancing while tting her education, d, following her high hool days, began her fessional career. She ent years 'on the road' pearing with name bands d during World War II aved Europe with the ited Service Organiza- ion.

"She has appeared in such well known places as The Palace, Capitol, and State Theatres in New York City, the Copacabana and Latin Quarter and the Oriental and Chicago Theatres in Chicago. She has also performed several times in the Las Vegas night spots.

"It was in Paris that she met her English husband, Reginald Webber, and they were married there in 1959. That same year they returned to Yates Center and their farm home. The couple has two sons, Kim, who is four, and Jack, five months.

"Mrs. Webber admits she was ready to give up her professional career and 'settle down'. However, she still practices dancing every day and teaches acrobatics and dancing each Saturday at Wichita School of Fine Arts.

"Now 42 years of age,

After Every Meal?

Meribeth is still as lithe and lovely as during her professional dancing days. Her figure and face could be the envy of any teenager.

"Performing and instructing her dancing students, the auburn-haired contortionist proved she is still as agile as in previous years. She did say, however, that after the birth of each of her two sons. she was careful not to begin the more complicated body manipulations until physically 'back into shape'. But she said that daily exercises and routine dancing were begun within a few days after each child's arrival. She considers this very important in maintaining her figure and talent.

"It was said that Meribeth's 'double up' act in Paris' Nouvelle Eve night club made the customers 'double up in glee'. Can she stand on her head? She can sit on it.

"Known as having an 'elastic back', she is the sort of dancer who gave novel twists in Al Read's London Revue, 'You"ll Be Lucky'. Her shapely pair of legs seem to do everything but what most people do with legs... stand on them. But as one observer said, 'Her pins are certainly nice to look at, whichever way up they may be.'

"She was described by one Londoner as being so perfectly proportioned that she is a joy to anyone's eyes. She came close to stealing the whole Continental Show in Montreal with her amazing torso-twisting act.

"Meribeth's last professional appearence was about two years ago in Radio City Music Hall, Rockefeller Center, New York City. Her 'In Your Easter Bonnet' act gave opportunity to put her shapely form into unbelievable knots. One critic remarked he had seen many a contortionist go on a bender, but never as pretty a pretzel as this.

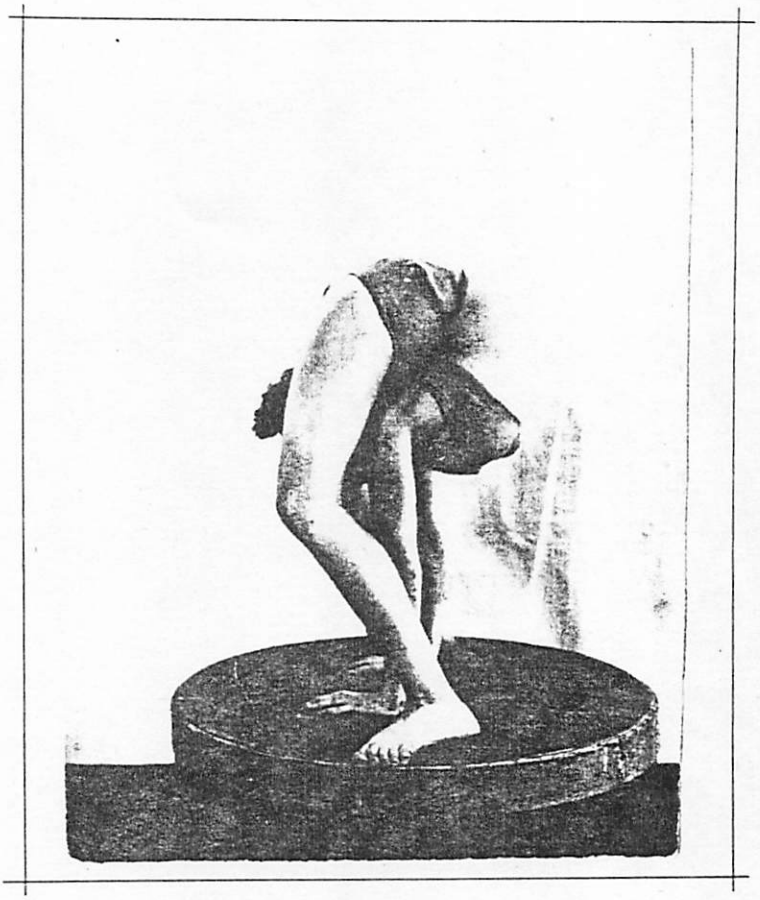
"Always her rubber-limbed abilities and body maneuvers rate big attention.

"Mrs. Webber said she has always been too active to have any weight problem. She observes no special diet but says that eating at least four hours before every performance is important. Never, she said, could a contortionist perform too soon after a meal.

"The performer noted that professional dancers now have a rougher time 'breaking into the business' than she did. There was a time, she stated, that one could travel, appearing almost nightly before fresh and appreciative audiences. Now, she continued, the media of television brings the performer before millions of persons at one time. Thus, the seeking for new and fresh talent for TV viewers makes it difficult for a dancer to appear too often.

"The dancer remarked she enjoyed working on TV but preferred a 'live' audience simply because their enthusiastic response made her a better performer.

"Mr. and Mrs. Webber and their children occupy and enjoy their large farm home near Yates Center and their days filled withe the lively antics of two healthly sons and the engrossing venture of raising strawberries. Mr. Webber has become well known for raising large strawberries and soon hopes to expand the farm to accomodate other fruit and vegetable specialties."



"Meribeth Really Is A Mixed Up Kid" (source unknown):

Meribeth Old slowly brought her left leg backwards over her shoulder blade and pensively massaged her ear with her big toe: 'I've always been a home girl,' she said sweetly. 'Uh-huh', I said. I didn't know what else to say.

"When I first met Meribeth, a few months before the above conversation, her head emerged slowly from under her right arm pit.

"'Glad to know you,' she smiled, as her head disappeared again.

"Chatting with a girl in such circumstances is not easy. Especially as she was standing on a table at the time. Or, at least I think she was standing. It was difficult to tell. Physically, she was just a mixed-up kid. I was watching round Olympia Circus when I chanced upon Meribeth. She was loosening up for her act.

"The guy who introduced us explained that she was a contortionist. I could see that. Her legs were waving gently in he air, and she looked like a piece of human knitting.

"'All your family are in show business, I suppose,' I said, trying to address the elusive head. I began to understand how it would feel to interview an octopus.

"'Good gracious no,' laughed a voice that came from behind a pair of shapely knees. 'My Mom and Pop, back in Kansas, have a grocery store, None of my family has ever done this sort of thing before. They think it's very clever.'

"'So do I,' I murmered. looking her ankles straight in the eyes. 'By the way,' I added, 'would it make you feel easier if I stood on my head to talk to you.'"'It would do you a lot of good,' laughed Meribeth, her face suddenly appearing - Cheshire-cat fashion - from under a frilled skirt. 'It keeps the blood running to the head, you know, and takes the strain off the heart'.

"This babe certainly is the most unusual circus girl I ever met. And that's saying something. She lives quietly by herself in a small hotel and spends all her spare time reading.

"During sixteen years as a contortionist she has bought a farm in Kansas to which she plans to retire next December - by which time she will have made enough money to stop tying herself in knots.

"And the thing she wants more than anything else in the world is a baby. 'I'm going to try to adopt one,' she smiled. 'I don't care what colour or race it is - so long as it is a baby. That's all I want when I retire.'

"I leaned down and addressed the head on the table. 'Why not get married', I asked.

"'I'm not going to get married just for the sake of getting married - not unless I fall in love,' she said firmly, tying herself into a reef knot. 'I've never had time to get engaged even, because in this sort of life, one is always moving on'.

"Meribeth suddenly untied herself as though somebody had pulled an invisible string, and I saw her stand up as an ordinary girl for the first time.

"'I'll be glad to stop being a mixed-up kid,' she grinned - and picked up her table and walked on to do her circus act.... but she bought a farm by getting tied up! "

(various newspaper and magazine reviews):

"Meribeth Old does most of her dancing by tying herself in incredible knots. Boff contortionist, the looker sells the house solid with smooth routining and clicko twists on floor and a prop table."

"Next was Brucetta, who did a really good acrobatic specialty which might have been sock in any other show." (Meribeth Old began her professional career as "Brucetta").

"In a sideshow spiel, Lewis brings on Meribeth Old who pretzels atop a table. She contorts beautifully into a variety of knots, climaxed by draping her legs over the edge of a table." (Riverside in Reno July 2, 1952 with Ted Lewis.)

"Well spotted specialties make the contorting of Meribeth Old a standout and this seemingly boneless gal twists into frantic positions and ties herself into knots that set off rapid palm work."

More reviews of Meribeth Old:

"Brucetta, cute acro-dancer and contortionist, had 'em on the edge of their chairs with floor and table routines, closing with a click novelty tap while perched on her head."

"Contortionist Meribeth Old, who sets a pace as curtain-raiser the rest of the show fails to equal, walks off with mitt honors. Her hair-raising body twisting and turning continue to amaze, even after many viewings. Somehow, she manages to make the art of turning herself inside out appear graceful rather than grotesque. Payees went all out for this one."

"Meribeth Old is tops in her field and does all sorts of twisting with her body. Gets rousing returns for her contorting."

"She is a comely contortinist and does supple backbends and cartwheels to send the show off to a strong start."

"Acro-contortionist Meribeth Old, working on a raised platform, displayed several mitt-getting stunts. The gal did a variety of waist bends and closed strong with a no-hand pinwheel."

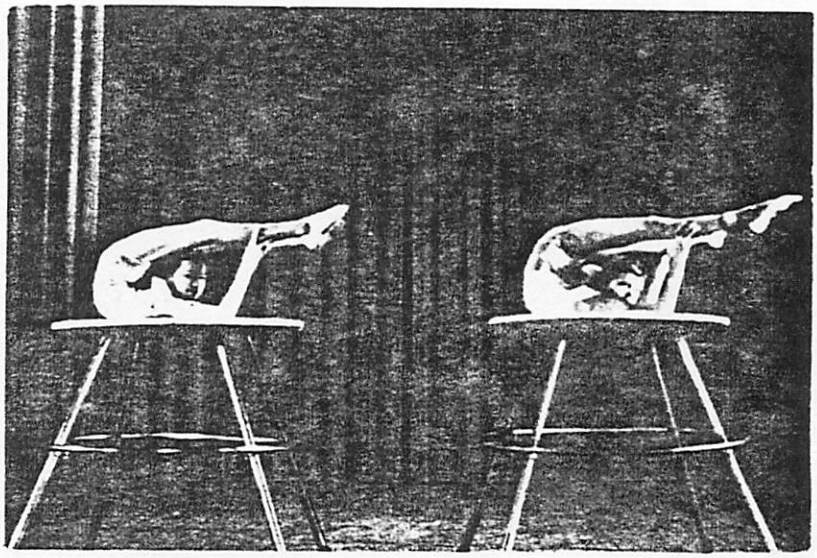
"Capitol, New York City. Meribeth Old's acro-contortions were well presented and equally well delivered. Miss Old showed plenty of charm and ability. Most of her work was atop a table, finishing up with a pedestal handstand into a deep backbend and a series of fast butterflies."

"Capitol, New York City. Meribeth Old sold her table top contortions with high appealing stunts. Her loping gait, butterflies, fast walkovers and pretzel twists won juicy hands."

RELIGION

Painful pose

TOP THIS, keep-fit freaks! A holy man from India is all wrapped up in his odd — and excruciating — form of worship.



(Above: JANA and JAMINA, ages 12 and 13 - Dresden. (photo courtesy Gerd Rasquin)

IN THE NEWS

Young British contortionist IAN FOX has been causing quite a sensation this summer in Blackpool, England, where he has been appearing with the spectacular illusion show "Mystique". He has already been signed up for a second season in 1989 with a new act which will incorporate his talents in bodybuilding as well as contortion.

APRIL TATRO is one of the models for the exercise book "The Cacciotti Method" by Tony Cacciotti, published in 1983 by Villard Books, New York.

"Funny People", a short-lived series during August, had a brief shot of the female contortionist with Cirque du Soleil of Canada on August 24th. A photo of her also appeared in the June 28th issue of Globe, a weekly newspaper.

"Dick Clark Live", another variety series, had several cheerleading groups perform on several programs, including the MATER DEI HIGH SCHOOL CHEERLEADERS from Santa Ana, California. Some good tumbling, splits and high kicks were seen.

Most of you probably watched the coverage of the gymnastics and rhythmic gymnastics events during the Olympics in September. Much limberness was shown, especially during the latter event.

Video views

Part III of "Camera: Early Photography" on the Discovery Channnel during October showed a 19th century photo of two male oriental backbenders.

"Seven Wonders of the Circus World" shown October 7th had GERMAINE KNIE performing splits between two elephants, and a great all male acrobatic troupe from Africa, the KENYA ACROBATS. Two members of the troupe were backbending contortionists, one especially performing a great many fairly close backbends throughout their act.

A special entitled "Body Watching" September 24th had two brief views of RUDY DEL MONTE performing his routine.

MOVIES

THE TIME, THE PLACE AND THE GIRL - 1946 musical starring Dennis Morgan, Jacko Carson, Janis Paige, S.Z. Sakall, Alan Hale, Florence Bates and Carmen Cavallero. There is an acro-contortion dance number at the end of the film to the tune of "A Little Girl in Calico".

NO RETREAT, NO SURRENDER. A 1986 martial-arts movie in which JEAN-CLAUDE VAN DAMME does cut splits on the ropes of the ring.

Sept 20, '88 EXAMINER

GEE WHIZ

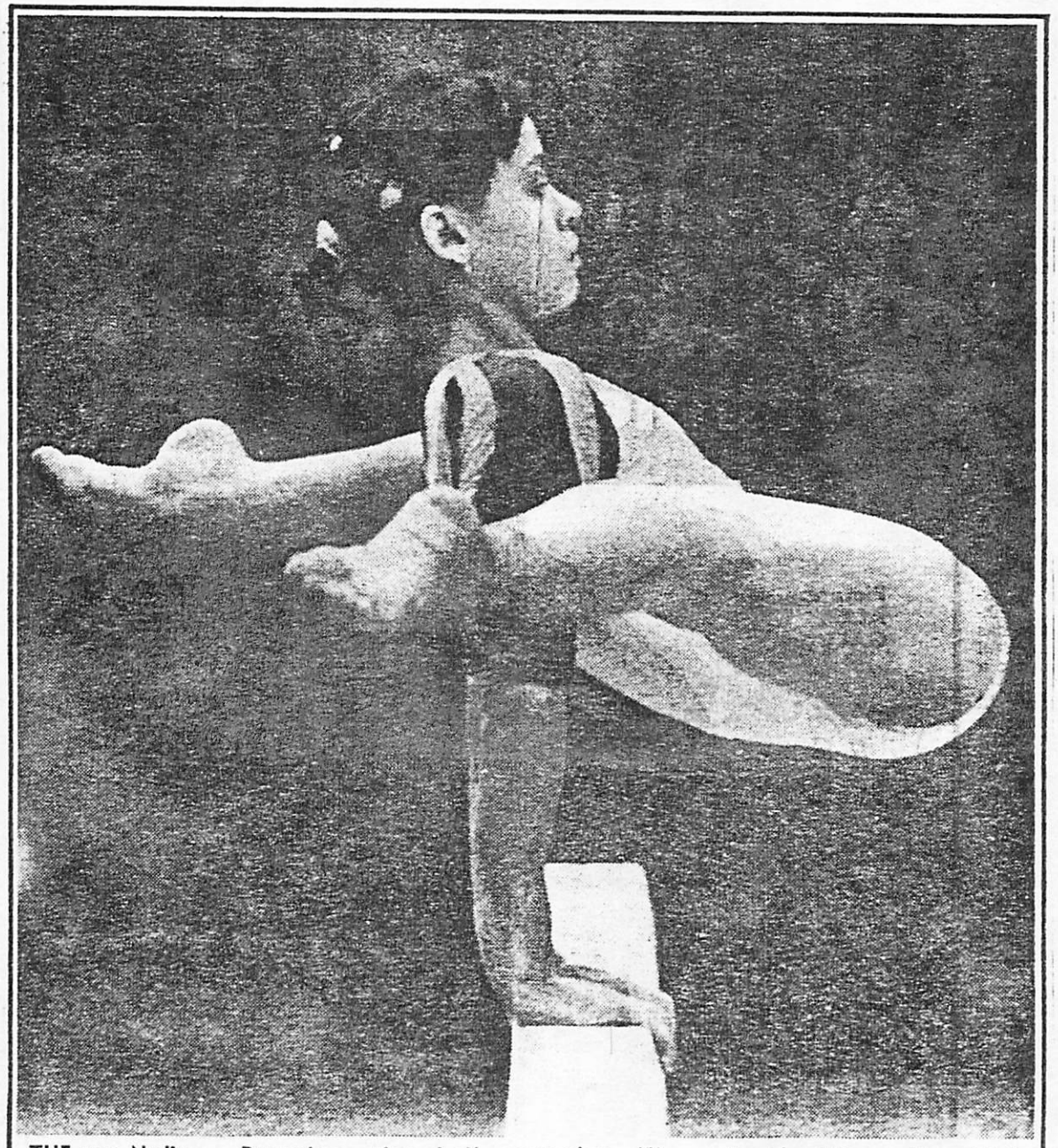
Light on her feet

TAKING A smoke break in the midst of a back-breaking acrobatic routine is no easy trick, but human pretzel Gan Yoke Lan makes it look like a cinch. The 16-year-old Malaysian, who's been body-bending since the age of 10, lights a cigarette with a match between her toes during a carnival show.

WANTED: Your ad here - only 25 cents per word!

NEEDED: photographs of students and amateur contortionists for use in Limber Times. Please submit to Ron Simpson, editor, at PO Box 11770, Pueblo, Colorado 81001 USA.

I am seeking colour Super-8mm movies of MERIBETH OLD, purchase or on loan. Contact: Ernst-Gunther Henschel, Arenberger Strase 25a, 5417 Urbar, West Germany.



THE new Nadia ... Rumanian gymnast Aurelia Dobre goes through her balance beam routine at the Olympic gymnastics hall yesterday. The Bucharest teenager helped her country win the world team title last October and is favored to win at least three gold medals in Seoul. Aurelia's toughest opposition is expected to come from the Chinese team.

(Australian newspaper)

Charly Roberts